

## Defamiliarizing Writing for Reluctant Students

by  
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During the early part of this century, an avant garde artist, Marcel Duchamp, entered a sculpture entitled "Fountain" in an art show. Since he was one of the judges for the show, he signed the sculpture with a pseudonym, "R. Mutt." "Fountain" consisted of a urinal on its side, on which the artist's name was messily inscribed. In placing a urinal in an art show, Duchamp was demonstrating that what counts as art is arbitrary. He anticipated much of what would happen in the art world during this century; it is not much of a stretch to get from Duchamp's "Fountain" to Andy Warhol's paintings of soup cans. Duchamp was also using what is called "defamiliarization." By placing a urinal in the context of an art show, we see that urinal in a new way. Perhaps we see the graceful, art deco lines in porcelain rather than simply focusing on the traditional function of this item.

Defamiliarization takes something — a thing or an idea — out of its normal context and puts it in a new one, which causes people to look at something with new eyes and perhaps to reconsider their old assumptions. This technique is a powerful teaching technique, particularly in the writing classroom.

### The Paradigms of Struggling Writers

While some of my students (elementary education undergraduates in a pre-certification program, taking a writing workshop-based class) came to class ready to write because they basically enjoyed writing, others felt apprehensive and even afraid on that first day of class. For their first assignment, I had students create an "imaginary portfolio" in which they would write about three pieces they had written in the past —

at any time. They would describe the piece — how they came to write it, what it was about, and why they chose it. After they selected three pieces, whether or not they had the actual pieces available to them, they would consider their strengths and weaknesses in the pieces and the things they felt they needed to work on in their writing.

The Imaginary Portfolio was a highly structured assignment; I asked students to write about specific things (e.g., choose a piece they had written in the past, describe certain aspects of it, write about their strengths, etc.). I gave a lot of latitude in the assignment about length and style. Some students handed in outlines while others handed in seven- or eight-page handwritten considerations of their entire writing careers. I didn't care what they handed in as long as they gave me the information I was requesting. By giving this kind of latitude — and by not grading the assignment — I got a sense of my students' approaches to writing. I found out who felt comfortable with writing and who was extremely uncomfortable with it just by reading the content of their papers, and also by considering how they wrote it.

The striking aspect of the imaginary portfolios, in terms of its self-assessment component, is that few students felt they had strengths as writers. Most students described their writing in negative terms. They all too often stated, "I have no strengths as a writer." Furthermore, it became clear that the terms on which they were assessing their own writing were expository only, and often solely focused on surface features, such as spelling, sentence structure, and even handwriting. They included little or nothing about content, meaning, or communication. Many of the students did not think of themselves as poets or fiction writers. In fact, they were *really* afraid of my class because, since they didn't feel successful with expository writing, they certainly were not going to succeed with stuff as hard as poetry.

What many of my students had was a paradigm that consisted of several fundamental beliefs:

- Writing is very difficult to do.
- Writing is not rewarding to do.
- Only very talented and creative people can do writing, especially "creative" writing; I am not one of those people.
- "Good" writing is grammatically correct, correctly spelled expository writing with good transitions between paragraphs and a well-structured thesis statement that is supported in subsequent paragraphs.
- Writing is something I have to do, but I would not do it if I had a choice about it.
- Writing is something that I do and that only my teacher

reads. It has no context other than to be graded. It proves to the teacher that I have done a certain amount of work; it has little or no communicative function.

#### Defamiliarization Activities

My goal as a teacher was to give students experiences with writing that would challenge this paradigm. But since they were so resistant to writing, how could I get around their strong beliefs? What I did was to defamiliarize writing, to get students to use pencil and paper without thinking about what they were doing as "writing." I did this with various kinds of writing resources and with collaborative writing experiences (after the individual writing workshop part of the class) in which I taught specific genres and/or set up specific experiences that led to writing.

#### With What Shall We Write?

One of the easiest ways in which defamiliarized writing was to change the tools my students were using. At the beginning of the term, I asked students to bring no more than \$3 on writing utensils to share — different kinds of paper, pencils, and so forth. I asked them to be creative and to find something that would be really interesting. On the second day of class, students would bring in the items which would be placed on my "Writing Tools" table.

**Students began to look forward to trying out new tools, and in that process, they were writing, almost without realizing it.**

Classroom À la Carte" — a film project that held writing implements and my classroom library.

As students moved into writing workshop time during each class session, they were invited to come to the cart and choose something to write on and something to write with. While some students used plain old notebook paper and blue ink, others found that the new stationery of various shapes and colors inspired poems. Paper in various colors inspired strong kinds of writing. In the first writing workshop using a palette of multiple colors of ink, one student wrote that the pen must have been magic. He had never written so fluently before.

Students began to look forward to trying out the new tools, and in that process, they were writing, almost without realizing it. Further, their writing took directions that they couldn't have predicted. These new directions were rewarding; they began to discover that they were creative people.

#### *Writing Resources*

My writing cart included a library of books — poetry books, books of anecdotes about writers, and resource books, including thesauruses, atlases, and various kinds of dictionaries. The best kind of dictionary, the one that inspired the most interest among my students because it was new to them, was a rhyming dictionary. This book defamiliarizes language, in that it organizes language not by the alphabet, as do standard dictionaries and thesauruses, but by the sound of words. It also defamiliarizes the whole idea of a dictionary because it is so unusual in its structure.

From the first day of class, in which I introduced all the books on the cart and passed them around the classroom, the two rhyming dictionaries were constantly in use. This dictionary helps students to find new connections between words. It is a fun kind of dictionary just to thumb through because you never know what you will find in it. And, best of all, it makes the possibility of writing rhymed poetry (which, in the opinions of many of my students, was the *only* kind of worthwhile poetry) within reach of the average writer.

#### *Classroom Drama*

One of the best ways of defamiliarizing writing is to work with classroom drama. Katie Barnes, an Ohio State University drama education student, helped me to develop a frame for a classroom drama that led to writing. I read Cynthia Rylant's *The Relatives Came*. We then had a classroom drama in which we were all at a family reunion. Participants verbally described to each other how they got to the reunion and

we talked about that in the large group. Then they talked about who they were eager to see and who they were not so eager to see. As this part came into discussion by the large group, we could see basis for conflict. Finally, we did table — “photographs” of reunion participants. The first was the ideal reunion photograph, then we did one with something just slightly wrong, followed by a reunion disaster. This activity set up a frame narrative.

At the end of the drama, I suggested the students that they write their character's experiences of the reunion in diary form or perhaps as a letter to someone who hadn't been there. While all students found things to write, this experience was a breakthrough for one student in particular. In a matter of fifteen or twenty minutes, an entire short story spilled onto her page. She could not stop herself from writing. The story was written in the voice of her character. She identified the experience as a very important step in her development as a writer — for the first time she really felt like a writer.

#### *Writing for Real Reasons*

Probably the best project I did during the two years I taught (and I did this for two terms) was my pen pal project. I worked with a local elementary school and got pen pals for each of my students. Each quarter we would take a grade level with which to be pen pals — and I rotated grade levels at the school across two years so that no student got more than one pen pal.

Initially, I thought that the elementary school teachers might find this project frustrating or too time consuming, but they were as enthusiastic about it as I was. Everyone — young and older students — looked forward to receiving letters. The students learned about children's writing, about invented spelling and about the egocentrism of a child who assumes that you remember exactly what question



## Defamiliarization Strategies in a Nutshell

Many activities support defamiliarization of writing in the classroom. Here are some starting points.

**Find out what the assumptions are about writing.** Maybe your students have had different experiences. I did the imaginary portfolio at the beginning of the term, a mid-term evaluation in which they listed all the pieces they had worked on and considered again their strengths, and a real portfolio at the end with pieces they had done during the class, and in which they wrote a self-evaluation that was similar to the imaginary portfolio. By the end of the class, I saw a shift in my students' ideas about what constitutes writing and about their own strengths.

**Take people outside of themselves.** Classroom drama is only one way to do this. Any kind of writing "as if" is helpful (e.g., writing in the voice of a historical person).

**Make students aware of as many possibilities for their writing as possible.** Every text that students read becomes a possibility for writing. They should also be encouraged to invent new genres.

**Give students tools for writing** — not just interesting pens and paper but also reference books. Opening a quote book or even an atlas at random can be a good starting point for writing.

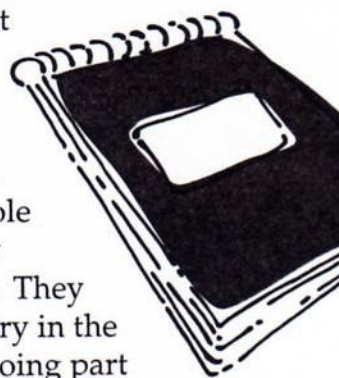
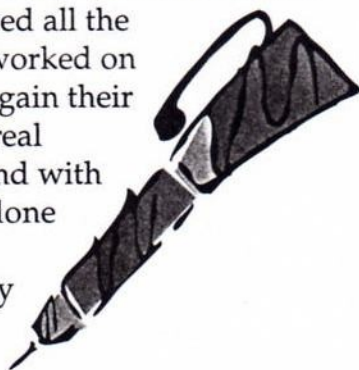
**Encourage authentic writing.** I never was able to organize this, but I wanted

to incorporate a senior citizen program in my pen pal project, to have three different age groups of people writing each other. Authenticity removes the artificiality of writing which had been part of my students' assumptions about writing.

**Give supportive feedback.** In my written feedback to students, I pointed out the parts of the text that fascinated me or caught my attention or that I found beautiful, moving, engaging, etc.

**Encourage experimentation** with new things and accept that many experiments do not work or need to be abandoned. I called the collaborative group work section of my class, in which everyone participated in writing activities I brought in, the "Eat a bite peas, dear" approach to writing. Everyone tried out new genres of writing. They didn't have to make a great personal commitment to them, as in cleaning their entire plates, as in writing whole books all by themselves. They just had to try in the context of doing part of the task.

**Create an atmosphere that supports risk-taking.** Using portfolio assessment in which I graded a collection of pieces that students had time to work and rework meant that I could give feedback on the individual pieces of writing without having to assign grades to everything. Additionally, anyone who took the risk of reading his/her own work in class was given a lot of support.





wrote and in what order (the child's letter read something like, "Yes. No. I think so. Seven. A cat. Music."). They also learned to read children's writing, not with an eye for correction but with an eye toward understanding, an important lesson for people who are going to be teachers. One quarter, the third graders with whom we were corresponding were doing a unit on heroes. Several of my students received

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letters that said something like, "We are studying heroes. Do you want to know who my hero is? You." The children's faith in my mostly 19- and 20-year-olds really gave something to my students.

Some of the best, most inventive writing that happened in my class happened in the context of writing to the pen pals. Students who had histories of turning in the most tired prose in the context of expository writing for their own classes, wrote and illustrated little books in order to delight their pen pals. They took great pains to make their writing interesting and fun to read. They thought at length about their audience — what the children could understand (should they write in cursive? will the child know these words?) and what the children would like to hear about. They dressed up their writing with stickers and occasionally included contraband items

(gum and candy), especially around the holidays.

One quarter, the youngsters were doing a poetry unit. I had my students spend a collaborative period writing poems individually or in groups for our pen pals, which we assembled into a book. The children loved the book. An interesting aspect of this, by the way, was that several of my students didn't sign their poems.

think they were too shy. The elementary school teacher told me that the children spent recess coming up with the handwriting in the book with the writing in the letters to determine the student at the end.

One quarter, we held a get-together with the pen pals at the elementary school. I had the students plan the activities for the get-together, since my students were going to be elementary school teachers themselves. Often, these activities included something like, as in the time we made a book in which each college student collaborated with her pen pal(s) (sometimes a college student had two pen pals in order to fill out the entire grade level) to contribute a poem, writing and illustration about pen pals, pizza. Another time, my students developed an activity in which the pen pals traced their hands (the big college student hand and the little elementary school student hand) on construction paper. They wrote these out and on each of the fingers wrote things about the person to whom they belonged. Then they pasted the two hands on another sheet of paper as a kind